

## Michael Roberts: Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate's Newly Appointed CEO



*The Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate (SWO) of the Lake Traverse Reservation in northeastern South Dakota and southeastern North Dakota has initiated a full tribal-member preference to fill all top management positions for its organization. SWO, with its visionary council, has put into motion an organization that meets the challenges of the Indian gaming industry during the poorest economic conditions in Indian gaming history. This forthright move is a first for the tribe and shows their confidence towards the people they serve. It is a monumental step towards what has been long awaited. One of the first to be hired under this new initiative is Michael J. Roberts, a Native son, whom SWO has named CEO of its Dakota Nation Gaming Enterprise (DNGE).*

Michael Roberts, an SWO tribal member, has a bright view of the tribe's future and its place in the gaming and business community. "In actuality, we are not just gaming," he said. "We are enterprises under one entity, amenities to a business core and enterprises to one tribal nation, which includes the working people within the organization."

Roberts is assessing the current situation of all DNGE businesses, bringing together its resources and projecting which direction these resources will take them. "Efficiency is the key in these strained economic times," said Roberts. "Efficiency will help us to sustain our place in the business world while continuing tribal member development. When the economy returns to strength we will be leaner and produce stronger profits. Then the future will have a brighter tale to tell." When asked what he envisions as the future he responded, "A separation of business and government, consolidation with all tribal business entities under one umbrella, quality of service, the capacity to respond quickly to the business world and clear processes in place to capitalize on opportunities."

Besides describing what he envisions, Michael also described what he himself is not. "I am not a manager," he explained, saying that in the past managers have held the CEO position. "That has been okay when the economy was good." He described himself as someone to call to fix things and to get things done right, and quickly. "When I've done all I can to streamline operations of tribal gaming, I will turn them over to someone else to manage." Within the national gaming environment a broader playing field has grown from shortages in governmental budgets. It is no secret that tribes have been making money in gaming; it is why states have taken the initiative to do the same. In these times a different leader will be forged in the industry, one that will do the same with less. SWO believes that can be a reality with a CEO sensitive to tribal needs, an eye on the broader world, and business savvy for day-to-day operations.

Michael is a sure product of his community, the Enemy Swim District near Waubay, South Dakota. All that was Dakota was engrained in his childhood by a loving grandmother who took this three-year-old orphaned boy in to be the youngest of 13 siblings. In his youth Roberts worked the

fields of nearby farms, removing glacial deposited stones from the path of the plow's blade. Twenty dollars for a 10-hour day's work was divided 15 ways, sometimes more. As time moved on he graduated from Waubay High School in 1989 and attended Northern State University (NSU) in Aberdeen, South Dakota. But before completing his studies he heeded the patriot's call to serve in the first Gulf War, attached to the Third Armor Division. After serving in the Gulf War, Michael moved to Minnesota, taking classes at a community college in Bloomington in 1993, and then transferring back to NSU, graduating with a bachelor's degree in marketing in 1996. Roberts worked as an assistant marketing director with SWO before venturing out on his own to start businesses such as Marketing Evolution, Inc., Creative Carpet Studio, and Thunderbird Building Interiors.

Today, Roberts is completing his MBA in marketing (March 2010), which will highlight a career in tribal business development and Indian gaming. When asked of Michael's character, long-time work associate Don June stated, "There are some things that you don't need to teach Michael, which is the love of his Native heritage, the love of his tribe and the love for business in general. I've seen his business practices and they are straight and honest. He has been schooled in business and he will use it to benefit his tribe." Drawing from his experience in both business and education, Roberts will assist the gaming and business entities of the SWO to establish them strategically within the overall economy.

It is easy to see how Roberts has not necessarily moved too far from his roots and has contributed to both nation and country. The ancient ones, whose voices continue to be heard in the wind and remembered through time, have embraced the approach of developing young tribal leaders. They smile upon hard work and silently cheer their forebears taking the lead in business and life. An elderly Native woman once prophesied, "They will return to their place of birth with new ideas and watch over our existence." There will continue to be changes within Indian Country that will resemble what SWO has done. One tribal council motion at a time, one returning son or daughter at a time, the organization will blossom as a prairie rose. ♣